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ABSTRACT

At professional meetings and conferences, the scarcity of women in the ranks of secondary principalships is very apparent. In 1988 the results of a national survey showed approximately 12 percent of high school principals were female. If skill and ability are not the problems standing in the way of women, why are the numbers so meager? From experience and interviews with practicing and potential female administrators six conjectures are made. They include the restrictions in mobility due to a female's partner also being in a career track and the difficulty of taking the necessary incremental steps without being hooked into the power network. The speech posits that many women have refused to fit the male mold. Some suggest that the female model may be superior. The very qualities that men have traditionally denigrated as feminine weaknesses--sympathy, sensitivity, and a lack of killer instinct--may often be advantages when it comes to bringing the best out of people. Listed are the skills in managers of successful working situations, the characteristics of good secondary school principals, the most important skills needed for the principalship, and how women can establish themselves as secondary principal candidates. (Contains 11 references.) (RR)

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Secondary Principalships
Where Are the Women?

by LINDA WYATT, *Secondary Principal, Crete, Nebraska*

Delivered at the National Association of Secondary School Principals, National Convention, San Francisco, California, February 17, 1992

As a secondary principal in Nebraska, I am one of only a dozen women holding a secondary building principalship in the state. At professional meetings and conferences the scarcity of women in the ranks of secondary principalships is very apparent. Conscious efforts have been taken in Nebraska in order to encourage women to pursue administrative careers, yet little progress seems to be taking place particularly at the secondary level.

Since my administrative experience has been limited to one state, I checked sources of data on a national perspective. In 1988 NASSP released the results of a national study of high school principals and assistant principals and compared the results to a similar study done in 1977. Across the nation approximately 12% of high school principals are female, compared to 7% in the 1977 survey; 18% of the high school assistant principals in the 1988 study are female.

Regional differences were apparent from the study. On the West Coast, 20% or more of the secondary principals and assistant principals are female, and more than 20% of the assistant principals in New England and the South are female.

According to data reported also in 1988 in a book by Emily Feistritzer entitled *Profile of School Administrators*, the phrase "old boys' club" has true meaning when it comes to the administrators of our public schools. They are disproportionately men, white and older than their peers in administrative positions in other fields.

A full 96% of superintendents and 76% of principals in public schools are men. Whereas 69% of teachers in public schools are women. Large inner cities have a higher percentage of women administrators than do suburban, rural or other urban areas. While 40% of superintendents in the suburbs and in rural areas are women, 13% of those in inner cities with a population of 150,000 or more are women.

Statistics reported in the March 1991 *Executive Educator* indicate that the percentage of women and minorities in school administration might be on the rise -- in small-town and city school districts especially. The increases are tiny but encouraging. The under-representation of women and minorities in school administration remains a problem that requires careful monitoring.

The national office of NASSP reports optimistically that more and more women are attending assessment centers and tend to score higher overall than the men attending.

If skill and ability are not the problems standing in the way of women, why are the numbers so meager? Based on my own experience and interviews with practicing and potential female administrators, I offer the following conjectures:

1. Some positions aren't good for anyone -- male or female. The expectations by some communities may be unreasonable or the political climate in some districts is not conducive to administrative leadership.

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2. The administrative power structure is very male dominated (i.e., superintendents, board presidents, principals, and coaches.) Women do not as readily access the network possibilities.
3. Women don't apply as frequently for high visibility positions as their male counterparts.
4. The mobility required when seeking secondary or higher administrative positions discourage many people with partners in a career track as well.
5. Paying the dues of the incremental steps is hard to do when you aren't hooked into the power network.
6. In most businesses, effective leadership is still defined as tough, competitive, rational, impersonal, strategic -- the traditional male model.

However, in light of the national attention to educational reform embracing empowerment, there has never been a time better suited for women to assume leadership positions. Our educational institutions are ripe for such leadership. "Not too long ago", as noted in *Newsweek*, March 17, 1986, "it was a widely accepted truth that women were unstable, indecisive, temperamental and manipulative and weren't good team players because they'd never played football." In fighting off these prejudices, many women simply tried to adopt masculine traits in the office.

As women have taken an increasing role in corporate life, however, many have refused to fit the male mold. Now some are going one step further, suggesting that the female model may be superior. The very qualities that men have traditionally denigrated as feminine weaknesses -- sympathy, sensitivity, a lack of the killer instinct -- may often be advantages when it comes to getting the best out of people.

Just being a woman isn't enough to make a good female manager, of course. Intelligence, education and experience all help to shape management style. Male and female executives alike have found there's no one formula for success.

Managers of successful working situations, school or business, are skilled in the following:

1. Paying attention to creating a good working climate.
2. Attending to the human factor - business (and schools) are all people and people in a large degree are very emotional. Sorting out the sometimes messy emotions of the workplace and praising people often breeds loyalty and encourages people to do their best.
3. Sensitivity to subtle variations can make women better lobbyists -- and success depends greatly on having good "political instincts".
4. Motherhood is good training for crisis management. Working mothers take heart -- we are probably more efficient, better organizers because we still carry the burden for most of the complex schedule juggling and needs-meeting that goes on in our families.
5. Team players -- Women may have the edge in teamwork as well. Many women executives participated in school sports. However, the lessons boys learn of the playing fields may not be all that positive. "Generally", according to Northrop engineer John Eslich, "males compete with males and somebody must be on top and someone must be on the bottom." Leadership studies of the first coed classes at West Point found that male and female cadets performed equally well in getting the job done. In evaluations by their subordinates, however, women were rated higher when it came to looking out for subordinates' welfare and showing interest in their lives.

The effective schools research identifies the following characteristics of good secondary school principals:

1. Innovative
2. Enthusiastic
3. Creative
4. Knowledgeable
5. Raised toward action
6. Trust Others
7. Encourage leadership in others
8. Place students' welfare and learning first
9. Share power, planning, decision making and accountability
10. Able to be tough when necessary -- about purposes, goals, practices, and professionalism.
11. Accountable for student learning
12. Remove roadblocks to effective teaching and learning

These characteristics are just as notable for women as men. We're describing the best and brightest in secondary administration. However, women are measured by the highest standards by all publics we serve as well as people we supervise because, as the cliche' goes, "women haven't earned the right to be mediocre." Such practices scare many excellent prospective leaders from taking the risks of leaving the security of a tenured position and actively seeking instability with additional expectations and responsibility.

I consider the following to be the most important skills needed for the principalship:

1. Vision -- you have to know where you're going if you want anyone to follow you.
2. Judgement -- use position power wisely in all situations.
3. People skills
4. Formal and informal communication skills
5. Organization
6. Problem-solving skills that result in win-win
7. Delegation and empowerment
8. Flexibility
9. High energy level
10. Dedication -- the job comes first!

How can women establish themselves as secondary principal candidates?

1. <u>Demonstrate the willingness to take risks/make decisions.</u>
   a. Male administrators have fewer years experience in the classroom than women. Women need to be encouraged early in their careers to pursue administrative preparation.
   b. Assume leadership roles in whatever capacity you currently serve, i.e., committee work, in-service presenters, or local teacher union positions.
2. <u>Make luck happen.</u> To be in the right place at the right time, you have to "throw your hat in the ring" -- apply, even if only to gain interview experience.

3. Sharpen those interview skills.
    a. Perfect that cover letter and resume.
    b. Be your best -- If you land an interview, half the battle is over! You have the chance to make that gut-level impression that you're the best person for the job.
4. Who you know helps!
    a. References are important.
    b. Ask others to put in a good word for you.

In order to establish a network in a male-dominated area rubbing elbows by joining organizations of the power structure is a good start. Visibility in professional circles as well as participation at social functions or activities will at least improve the odds of being recognized by name.

Establish credibility of ability. Know your strengths and use those areas to overshadow your weaknesses. Set and meet high standards for yourself and others. Be accountable and hold others accountable. Keep your focus on the big picture, but the big picture is made of many little details that need to be driven and directed.

The most credible mentor most likely will be your immediate supervisor or someone closely associated with your work. Seek mentors in the power structure of your targeted position. In a male-dominated field, male mentors who convey respect for your work can open many a closed door.

Other personal reflections/hints:

1. It's okay to be the only woman in a group.
2. Don't assume you have to be noticed and, therefore, dominate a group or discussion. Good listening skills and careful reflection are critical too.
3. Get to know people who currently have the job level you seek, learn from their experiences.
4. Hiring groups are looking for more than competency, learn to read the climate of a position and whether you can deliver the desired model.
5. Be involved at activities. You may want to brush up on your golf game.
6. Keep your moving boxes -- male or female, administrators are the temporary help.

It makes good sense for secondary schools to use the best resources available. I encourage bright capable women and men who aspire to the secondary principalship to develop a plan to make it happen for them. After all, kids deserve the best leadership that's available. The trail has been charted by those before us -- greater numbers taking to the trail will make the route easier for others to follow.

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